

# For the Sarahs of the world

**Adrienne Mand Lewin** tells us Howard Weinstein's story and the journey of Solar Ear, an organisation which provides hearing aids and changes lives through social entrepreneurship

Howard Weinstein's story is a tale of two Sarahs who changed the course of his life and made a big difference in the world. One was his beloved daughter, whose unexpected death from a brain aneurysm at age 10 dealt him a blow from which he did not know how to recover. The other showed him how to do just that.

Weinstein founded Solar Ear, which provides low-cost, solar energy-powered hearing aids for people around the world, all built by employees who themselves are deaf. The company also invests in the empowerment of its workers and other social missions, a shining example of what it means to be a true socially responsible corporate citizen. The goal is to open up the world in every way to those who are hard of hearing.

Weinstein says he started this endeavor ... "in a way, to give meaning to my daughter's death. In retrospect, it brought meaning to my life."

The genesis of Solar Ear began in 1995 when Sarah died in the middle of the night. One week later, Weinstein was fired by the plumbing business in Montreal, Canada, where he was president. He spent time in therapy and started his own business, but, still despondent and uninspired, he decided to become a Peace Corps volunteer

in Africa to help underprivileged women. In 2002, the global development organization World University Service of Canada sent him and his wife at the time to the small, rural village of Otse in Botswana, where he worked at Camp Hill Community Trust, a community for disabled people.

On his first day there, he was visited by a woman and her teenage student, also named Sarah, who attended a school for the deaf and was in need of a hearing aid. She discussed living in poverty while having a disability, viewed in the local culture as a curse from God. He asked about their wishes for her future, which were to finish school and find employment, and he visited her school where he met others in the same situation. "I basically wrote their hopes and dreams into a business plan," recalls Weinstein, who has an MBA from Syracuse University.

With \$250,000 in seed money from the African Development Corporation, he created a company, then called Godisa Technologies, with Sarah Phiri – who was born the same exact day as his daughter – and nine other deaf young women. They set out to invent an affordable alternative to existing hearing aids, whose initial costs and the price of batteries rendered them unattainable to many

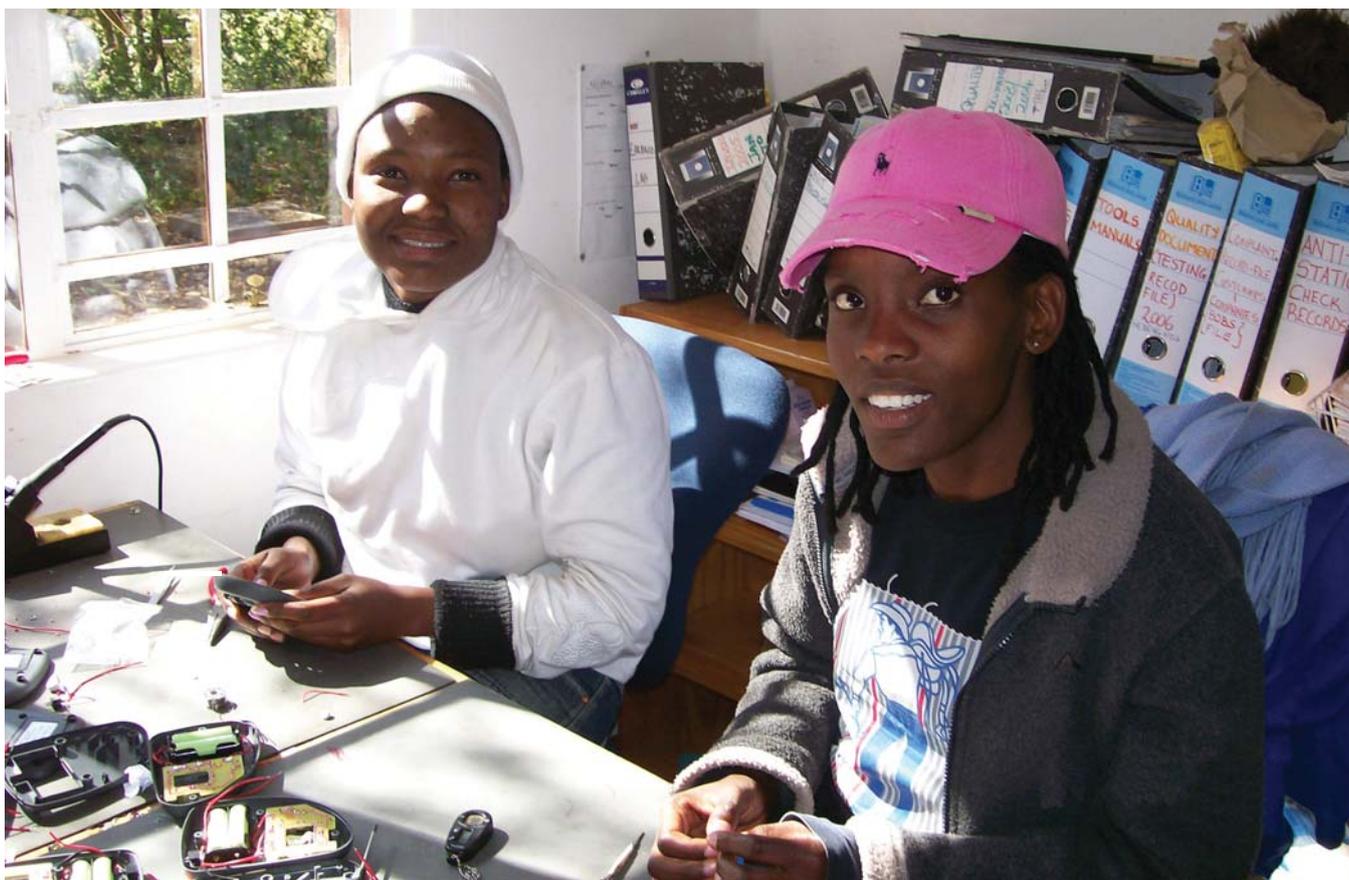
who needed them. Weinstein hired an electronics instructor to teach them the skills they needed to design and manufacture the product.

The result was an innovative product that earned those deaf employees The Tech Award from the Tech Museum of Innovation, the World Technology Network Award and the Verizon Powerful Answers Award. The equally game-changing company has now expanded to multiple countries, changing the lives of deaf people around the world.

## **A Threefold Mission**

According to Solar Ear, there are 642 million people worldwide who need hearing aids, 400 million of whom live in developing countries, while there are 10 million hearing aids produced each year – only enough for 1.5 percent of the hearing impaired. Their aim is to provide hearing aids





to that population, allowing them to become educated and employed and to break the cycle of poverty. "If you can get a child a hearing aid before the age of 3, she can learn to develop speech and go to a public school," Weinstein says.

Solar Ear's 12 models of hearing aids all work with a solar-powered recharger and batteries that last three years. "The solar charger is the key thing," Weinstein says. "We buy the hearing aid components and work on a lower margin than other providers." The cost differential from other brands is significant: Solar Ear's hearing aids cost between \$50 and \$200, while its competitors' products cost \$500 to nearly \$3,000, plus the cost of new batteries bought frequently.

Solar Ear expanded operations to São Paulo, Brazil, four years after its founding. It also has a facility in China with a Middle East and Russia presence being planned. It has sold about 50,000 FDA-approved digital hearing aids, about 100,000 solar rechargers and approximately 250,000 rechargeable hearing aid batteries. It follows the DREET method of holistically fighting hearing loss through detection, research, education, equipment and training. "We didn't patent anything," Weinstein says, adding that he wishes the industry's top manufacturers – Phonak, Widex, Starkey, GN ReSound and Siemens – would adopt Solar Ear's technology and assist enough underprivileged people that it puts his company out of business.

Solar Ear is structured as a sustainable social business, which it operates on several levels. To give people with a disability the chance to thrive, it employs them, and not

simply out of good will. Weinstein says people who are deaf and speak sign language have well-developed hand-eye coordination, which lends itself to micro-soldering the components in the company's hearing aids. In addition, Solar Ear reinvests one-third of its profits back into the business, one-third toward its social mission and one-third toward the empowerment of its workers.

To achieve its social mission, Solar Ear listens to the cares of its employees. In Botswana, it ran an HIV/AIDS educational program for people who are deaf. "People who are deaf have generally low literacy skills in developing countries," Weinstein says. "They don't read and obviously watch TV or listen to the radio. Studies show people with disabilities around the world have a higher rate of HIV/AIDS." In São Paulo, the business provided more than 5,000 speech language and voice therapies for deaf children, and in China it worked to change public policy to allow deaf people to study electronics. In the Middle East, Weinstein envisions hiring deaf Muslims, Jews and Christians to work together at Solar Ear.

In addition, Solar Ear trained deaf people to repair small appliances and work in customer service for Walmart in Brazil. The company started a landscaping business for people with Down syndrome in Botswana, utilizing their strengths with repetitive tasks. They even worked at the American ambassador's residence. Weinstein says the project was inspired by those he met at Camp Hill, where the Christians believe those with Down syndrome were reincarnated to teach others about how to live life.



"I learned more about living in the present with unconditional love," he says.

Solar Ear employs 75 people who are deaf. "One day a week, we do not work, we empower them through education to give them the confidence to build up their self-esteem," Weinstein says. Phiri is now president of the operation in Botswana. When Solar Ear was starting up in São Paulo, two workers from Botswana traveled there to train the new employees for six months. "It was the first time they had a teacher who was deaf, and saw they could be teacher one day. It also was the first time their teacher was black, which changed the paradigms of what a person who is black can do." Similarly, the "kids from Brazil" traveled to China to establish the business there.

The experiences are life-changing for the employees. "I remember flying back from Brazil to Botswana, one woke me up in the middle of the flight and said, 'I don't want to be poor anymore.' He now works for another company and has traveled the world," Weinstein says. "They become teachers and leaders in the deaf community. Other companies are starting to hire people who are deaf because they see their ability in developing countries."

### Empowering Change

Weinstein lives in São Paulo and mentors the Solar Ear managers, as well as other social entrepreneurs. He is starting a program working with Native Americans and First Nation people in Canada to bring Solar Ear devices to those there who can't afford hearing aids and expand employment opportunities for those who are deaf.

He is just as proud of the secondary problems Solar Ear has

helped to solve. When his Botswana employees received their first paychecks, they were unable to deposit them in a local bank because they couldn't communicate with the tellers. Solar Ear taught tellers at six major banks how to use sign language to make the banks accessible. When the business first launched, hearing aids were only available with beige shells that matched Caucasian skin. They fought for ones to match the Africans' skin tone.

For all of his efforts,

Weinstein has been named an Ashoka Fellow for social entrepreneurship, an American Academy of Audiology Humanitarian Laureate, a Tech Award Laureate, the social entrepreneur of the year by the World Technology Network and a Yunus Social Business Fellow, among other citations from the United Nations and other organizations. "I receive these awards on behalf of the workers who are deaf," he says. "They invented it. They go around the world teaching it. I am just their voice."

And he says the employees are much more impressive than he is. "Ten people who are deaf from rural Africa invented products that are in a permanent exhibit at the Smithsonian," Weinstein says. "I haven't accomplished one-tenth of 1 percent that they have. Look where they came from. They invented products that are exhibited around the world and products that have changed the world. ... They've changed me more than I've changed them, and all the changes in their life have come from their work."

He intends to keep empowering more people to do the same. "I'm helping them get more hearing aids to the Sarahs in their country," he says, adding, "I do this project for the Sarahs of the world."



Adrienne Mand Lewin is editor-in-chief of *Diversity in Action* magazine, which highlights diverse professionals and students working in STEM fields. She has been a journalist for 25 years and is based in the United States.

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